

The Problem of Christian Suffering, Part 2 – June 19th, 2011

- Today will be part two of a topical teaching I've chosen to title; "The Problem of Christian Suffering." We began this new series last Sunday.
- We took a break from our expositional teaching of Romans to do this because the Holy Spirit directed and burdened my heart with this topic.
- In so doing, I know that we have caused even more suffering for the full on Bible Prophecy Addicts who are now suffering from withdrawals.
- Last week we asked four questions, all of which were foundational "why" questions, in that all four of them became the four cornerstones.
- It's upon this foundation of "why," that we're now able to build the framework of the "what," with namely; what good comes from our suffering?
- For those who were here for part one, I sent you home with some homework, so that we could hit the ground running with our framework.

Matthew 7:24-27 NIV "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. (25) The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. (26) But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. (27) The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."

- What Jesus is teaching is, there are two foundations upon which one builds, one sand one rock, and the only one that stands is on the rock.
- The question becomes; upon which foundation am I when those storms of life come down upon me, and those trials in life rise up against me?
- The answer will come when the foundation of my faith is tested by the storms of suffering, in that it may reveal a weak and faulty foundation.

Proverbs 24:10 NIV If you falter in times of trouble, how small is your strength!

- Those "times of trouble" not only show what we're made of, they expose what we're weak in, and in the process of doing that, make us strong.
- How else are we to know our foundation lacks depth and strength were it not for those times of trouble. A roof only leaks during a rainstorm.
- While I know that's a firm grasp of the obvious, we would do well to consider that if we never have any rainstorms, we'll end up with a desert.
- Also, if an airplane has no resistance from the wind that's against it, it can never hope to fly. The greater the resistance, the greater the height.
- This is what I call the paradox of Christian suffering; the way up is the way down, and the seed can only sprout life when it falls down and dies.
- I'll take it a step further and say that not only do troubles and trials make us strong, they make us great, in that it's the way to know great faith.

George Mueller - "The only way to know great faith is to endure great trials"

- This is how, and where we now transition from the foundation of "why" to the framework of "what." A strong foundation a great building makes.
- So, we are ready to go from the questions of "why" to the answers of "what." What is it that God is desiring to accomplish by allowing the trial.
- What follows is, again, not exhaustive, nor is it in any particular order. I am simply going to present some plausible answers to the "what."

#1: GOD MAY BE SPARING ME - It may be that God is sparing me, or a loved one, from what could become even more suffering.

Isaiah 57:1 NIV The righteous perish, and no one ponders it in his heart; devout men are taken away, and no one understands that the righteous are taken away to be spared from evil.

Matthew 14:22-32 NIV Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. (23) After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, (24) but the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it. (25) During the fourth watch of the night Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. (26) When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. "It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear. (27) But Jesus immediately said to them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." (28) "Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water." (29) "Come," he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. (30) But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!" (31) Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?" (32) And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down.

- I find it interesting how that Matthew records three times this word "immediately" as it relates to Jesus responding to Peter and His disciples.
- He immediately makes them get into the boat for the other side, then immediately says to take courage and not be afraid because it's Him.
- He then immediately reaches out His hand and saves Peter from drowning. You almost get the impression that Jesus had a sense of urgency.
- Why would Jesus want them in the boat, and over to the other side, knowing that there would be a perilous storm in which they could perish?
- I believe as one suggested, it was because Jesus wanted to protect them, even spare them from what could have been a more perilous storm.
- He wanted to get them into the boat immediately after feeding the multitudes because they may have been tempted to set up a kingdom there.

#2: GOD MAY BE PREPARING ME - God may use years of suffering to prepare me, for that which He has prepared for me.

- I think of Joseph, starting with those two dreams that God gave him, which I believe was the beginning of what God was introducing to him.
- It leads to his own father rebuking him, and his own brothers betraying him, when he's left in the pit to die, but then sold into slavery in Egypt.
- It seems to get better when he's put in charge of Potiphar's house, but is falsely accused by his boss's wife when he refuses her seduction.
- Though innocent of the charges he's thrown into prison, only to be betrayed and forgotten after interpreting the butler and baker's two dreams.
- Two years later, Pharaoh has two dreams, and because Joseph interprets them, he is then promoted to the most powerful position in Egypt.
- But, for 17 years Joseph suffered. Why? What good could come? God was preparing Joseph for that which God was preparing for Joseph.
- Here's an interesting question, and one for which I've pondered; "why are there always two dreams?" Because "two" is what establishes it.
- Maybe you've heard it said that if one man calls you a donkey, pay no attention, but if two men call you a donkey, then go get your saddle.
- God was establishing Joseph for what He's establishing for Joseph. What God is doing in Joseph, is the good accomplished through Joseph.

Genesis 50:20 NIV You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.

- God could have never accomplished putting Joseph on the pinnacle of power, had He not first put him in the deep pit, of pain and despair.
- God cannot prematurely position a man without first preparing that man for that which He has for many years been preparing for that man.
- God had to establish Joseph and refine Joseph in the furnace of affliction with its flames of preparation so he wouldn't falter in his exaltation.

Isaiah 48:10 KJV Behold, I have refined thee, but not with silver; I have chosen thee in the furnace of affliction.

"This depression comes over me whenever the Lord is preparing a larger blessing for my ministry. The cloud is black before it breaks and overshadows before it yields its deluge of mercy. Depression has now become to me as a prophet in rough clothing, a John the Baptist heralding the nearer coming of my Lord's richer benison. So have far better men found it. The scouring of the vessel has fitted it for the Master's use. Immersion in suffering has preceded the filling of the Holy Ghost. Fasting gives an appetite for the banquet. The Lord is revealed in the backside of the desert, while His servant keeps the sheep and waits in solitary awe. The wilderness is the way to Canaan. The low valley leads to the towering mountain. Defeat prepares for victory. The raven is sent forth before the dove. The darkest hour of the night precedes the day-dawn. The mariners go down to the depths, but the next wave makes them mount to the heaven. Their soul is melted because of trouble before He bringeth them to their desired haven."

Charles Hadden Spurgeon

#3: GOD MAY BE HUMBLING ME - It may be that God is humbling me, and even ruining me, for Himself.

- I think of the beloved Apostle Paul whom we've sort of become close friends with during our prior study in Acts, and current study in Romans.
- Though he's certainly in good company with many other great men of God in the pages of Holy writ, he had to be greatly humbled by God first.
- I would suggest that Saul of Tarsus had to be both humbled and ruined by the Lord, before Paul the Apostle could become strong in the Lord.

2 Corinthians 12:7-10 NIV (7) To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. (8) Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. (9) But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. (10) That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Proverbs 3:34 NKJV Surely He scorns the scornful, But gives grace to the humble.

Proverbs 11:2 NIV When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom.

Proverbs 15:33 NIV The fear of the LORD teaches a man wisdom, and humility comes before honor.

Proverbs 22:4 NIV Humility and the fear of the LORD bring wealth and honor and life.

Proverbs 29:23 NKJV A man's pride will bring him low, But the humble in spirit will retain honor.

"Fits of depression come over the most of us. Cheerful as we may be, we must at intervals be cast down. The strong are not always vigorous, the wise not always ready, the brave not always courageous, and the joyous not always happy. ...Knowing by most painful experience what deep depression of spirit means, being visited therewith at seasons by no means few or far between, I thought it might be consolatory to some of my brethren if I gave my thoughts thereon, that younger men might not fancy that some strange thing had happened to them when they became for a season possessed by melancholy; and that sadder men might know that one upon whom the sun has shown right joyously did not always walk in the light."

Charles Hadden Spurgeon

#4: GOD MAY BE USING ME - It may be that God is allowing the suffering so He has permission to use me.

2 Corinthians 1:3-7 NIV (3) Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, (4) who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. (5) For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. (6) If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. (7) And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.

"It is doubtful whether God can bless a man greatly until He has hurt him deeply."

A.W. Tozer

"It is of necessity that we are sometimes in heaviness. Good men are promised tribulation in this world, and ministers may expect a larger share than others, that they may learn sympathy with the Lord's suffering people, and so may be fitting shepherds of an ailing flock. ... Men, and men subject to human passions, the all-wise God has chosen to be His vessels of grace; hence these tears, hence these perplexities and castings down. These infirmities may be no detriment to a man's career of special usefulness. They may even have been imposed upon him by divine wisdom as necessary qualification for his peculiar course of service. Some plants owe their medicinal qualities to the marsh in which they grow; others to the shades in which alone they flourish. ... Pain has, in some cases, developed genius, hunting out the soul which otherwise might have slept like a lion in its den."

Charles Hadden Spurgeon

#5: GOD MAY BE GROWING ME - God may be allowing the trial because He's wanting to grow me spiritually into maturity.

- The problem with spiritual maturity is there are no shortcuts. This may explain why, but not excuse how, we have "Cotton-Candy Christianity."
- The Cotton-Candy Christian becomes stunted in their growth, and shallow in their faith, because they live only on their feelings and cravings.
- They give into, and live on, their sweet tooth for only that which is sugar coated, which then leads to cavities in their unhealthy Christian life.

- Then they end up with cavities in their Christian life, and will try to numb the pain with the Novocain of a bottle of pills, or a bottle of alcohol.
- Pain and suffering are necessary to survive and thrive. If there's no hunger pains we wouldn't survive, no birth pains and we wouldn't be alive.

"The reason we are [even] here in the natural world is because our mothers struggled [and suffered] for our existence; and the more unhindered the birth pangs, the stronger and healthier the child. A thing is worth just what it costs."

Oswald Chambers, "Baffled to Fight Better," p. 100

James 1:2-8 NIV Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, (3) because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. (4) Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. (5) If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. (6) But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. (7) That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; (8) he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.

Acts 20:24 NKJV But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.

- Woven into the fabric of this verse, we have the secret to how Paul was able to "finish the race." It's found in counting his life as being worthless.
- This is why nothing could move Paul and why he finished well. He had already counted the cost, and knew it would cost him his life in this world.
- He had done the math, which solved the problem of self, and in so doing, picked up his cross, and died to himself, so he could follow the Lord.

Luke 9:23-24 NIV Then he said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. (24) For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.

Luke 14:28-30 NKJV For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has *enough to finish it*— (29) lest, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see *it* begin to mock him, (30) saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.'

- Immature Christians won't finish because somewhere they were the recipient of pain and suffering and doubted God, feeling betrayed by God.
- This may be why many professing Christians never grow. The seed germinates but can't break through what one called the "Betrayal Barrier."
- This brand of Christian never grows lacking the strength of character and spiritual maturity believing in God and not their beliefs about God.

"Real suffering comes when a man's statement of his belief in God is divorced from his personal relationship to God. ...[The] criticism of many so-called Christians [is] that they do not believe in God, but only believe their beliefs about God."

Oswald Chambers, "Baffled to Fight Better," pp. 26, 27